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ABSTRACT

"Create Your Own," month-long "Artist in Education" residencies sponsored by the Ohio Arts Council, are used to guide students and teachers through the process of taking the vision of an original opera conceived by students and turning it into a reality. A local opera company is actually created. "Create Your Own" shows children that opera can be understood and approached as a method of spinning a tale. They can learn to tell stories they have created through singing because opera uses the natural, integrated aspects of a child's life--drama, music, movement, and the visual arts. First the children are introduced to opera by pulling everything they need out of an old trunk, helping students connect with the art form. For those who care nothing about singing, physical skills are necessary to construct a set. The project is run like a professional opera company--each student signs a contract for agreed services and maintaining course work during the project. Students write everything--dialog, music, stage cues--and construct all the scenery and take care of props, costumes, makeup, and lighting. To perform, they must audition. Performance skills grow as students work through the performance process. An all-school and evening community performance as well as tours to other schools or senior citizens centers provide opportunities for students to build their skills. (NKA)

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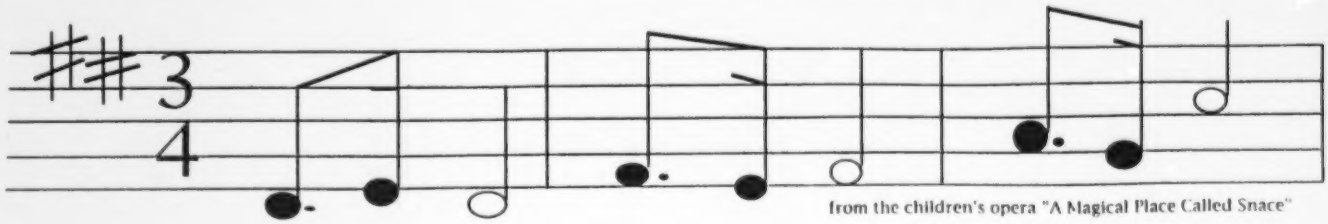

from the children's opera "A Magical Place Called Snace"

The Magical Place called Opera

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"Create Your Own" teaches children to create and stage their own opera -- from writing the musical score and story to the final performance.

"This was better than Nintendo," said Jim, the blond, long-haired fifth-grader with a spray of freckles across his nose. He wasn't talking about a video game or recess, he was talking about opera in his rural, mid-Ohio school. Jim was not the reigning hero or the director, but a member of the set construction team. His excitement for his role in the opera was so infectious and real that he and Chuck, his roly-poly, tough-guy buddy, were not allowed on the school bus one day because they were trying to bring saws, hammers and tool belts to school to build the set.

This enthusiasm rises out of the unlikely. As a way to introduce children to opera, I have developed "Create Your Own", month-long Artist in Education residencies sponsored by the Ohio Arts Council. I use these residencies as a method of guiding students and teachers through the process of taking the vision of an original opera conceived by students and turning it into a reality. We actually create a local opera company.

"Create Your Own" shows children that opera is not elitist, high brow art, but simply a method of spinning a tale. They can learn to tell stories they have created through singing as easily as Mozart or Puccini because opera uses the natural, integrated aspects of a child's life - drama, music, movement and the visual arts. Opera is like the movies of today, and children never question singing their deepest emotions. Writing an opera with children in school validates their natural, make-believe, summertime activity of putting on original "happenings" in the garage or beneath the basement stairs.

These childhood happenings are too often discouraged as frivolous games, and, as children mature, they are encouraged to grow out of make-believe into reality. But as children develop skills, they can apply that knowledge base to their creative happenings and write original operas.

Jill, a sixth-grader from Cincinnati, said, "We really felt like we were doing the real thing. Letting the kids do it all brought out [their] talents. The opera is something that I will never forget!" The students blossom from an "I hate opera" attitude to knowing that they have a place in the creation. Jim and Chuck, who did not care at all about singing, were involved in an opera because their skills from working the farm were extremely valuable for the success of the opera at their school.

The children's first introduction to opera with Create Your Own is through an "informance" called "Opera in a Box" where we uncover the character of Musetta from the Puccini opera, *La Boheme*, by pulling everything we need from an old trunk. For most students, this is their first contact with opera or an opera singer, and it is important in helping the students connect with the art form and the artist. Their questions, "How do you sing like that?" or "Can you break glass?", are encouraged so that they begin to understand opera from a point of personal discovery.

The project is run like a professional opera company. Each student signs a contract for agreed services and maintaining their course work during the project. All announcements are posted on a call

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board, and students check the board for the schedule.

Before I arrive, a decision-making group is chosen. This core group meets regularly and understands that their role is to refine each step of the process. This leads to collective ownership of the opera as all decisions are made by consensus. The story is determined by the intent of the project. Create Your Own can easily support specific academic guidelines or integrated units. Create Your Own seems to work best with students from third grade through college because of their knowledge base and skills, but is can be adapted for younger students and students with special needs.

Self-contained picture books, researched historical events, stories from life experiences and fantasies can be some of the foundations for building an opera. The core group investigates what makes a story interesting (introduction, climax, conclusion, conflict, resolution) and the song structures needed (arias, duets, trios, quartets, ensembles, choruses). The only criteria is that the opera must include crowd scenes to provide opportunities for all who want to be performers. Keeping the story simple and connected is a challenge. Young students always want to add a narrator to link the ideas, but working through motivations and transitions is an important process of developing plots.

A scene from the children's opera "Twelve Dancing Princesses" illustrates how children create an opera from beginning to end - from writing the original story and musical score to doing the staging, set, costumes and makeup to the final performance.

> When students begin the process with a blank page and create sight, sound, laughter, tears, melody and drama -- there is no learning more profound than this.

The students on the writing team are introduced to the outline, and we discuss building characters and how a personality is expressed in word usage. We explore character traits in the language of plays and poetry.

The scenes are divided up, and the number of writers for each scene corresponds with the number of primary characters. They begin by role playing with conversations from the scene reflecting the attitudes of the characters, and they work out the details before they begin to write the libretto, the text or story of the opera.

Arias are monologues set to music, and monologues are the reflections of a single character that are verbalized. We choose appropriate places in the libretto to express deep feelings and use less conversational and more poetic language. The lyricists must understand that the lyrics will continue to evolve as the composers adapt the music to the words.

While the writing team is creating the libretto, the set, costume and publicity design teams are introduced to the outline. We investigate the impact of theatrical designs by discovering what is communicated through photos and videos of other productions. It is critical to establish space, technical, material, and financial limitations because the designers are creating the blue prints to be used by the construction crew.

Appropriate research is done, community experts are invited in, and multiple designs are created. The team consolidates the designs, and final prints with measurements are created.

Costumes are designed in the same manner with the understanding that new costumes will not be constructed but adaptations will be made from ready-made clothing from second hand stores and personal closets.

By natural selection, the students who choose to be composers have music skills or a great interest in music, but understanding musical notation is not a prerequisite. The composers are introduced to the outline and the specific musical forms evident in the libretto.

As a large group, we work through the process of creating one short piece from the libretto. We discover the syntax of the text by

Fourth-grade performers in the children's opera, "A Magical Place Called Snace", visit the process gallery where photos and examples of the work in process are displayed.

determining the most important words and marking the stressed syllables. The stresses determine the beat, and the rhythm of the text determines which words should be fast and slow, short, long and where there should be silence. The coinciding musical symbols are applied to the text to notate the rhythm. The pitches are charted like a graph and are notated on a staff. We then play the pieces on the piano adjusting the tonality and rhythms and editing the work to assist the singability.

The same process is duplicated by each composer so even students who know no traditional notation are able to compose in this manner and build a foundation of musical skills in the process. The music teacher and community musicians are invaluable resources in guiding the composers. The overture can be a composed piece using available rhythm and melodic instruments. By reading the libretto and listening to the composed music, the students discover the essence of the piece and the moods to be conveyed. Students can write the instrumental parts for various Orff and rhythm instruments that build textures in sound. The notation can be blocked off by beats and counted out by the conductor. One of my fourth-grade groups created their piece of music using animals to denote tempo -- a snail for slow and a rabbit for fast.

The set construction team is introduced to the outline and the designs. At the first contact, we discuss their role as construction crew to prevent them from becoming designers. Redesigning is appropriate only if construction is impossible with the original plans. Invariably, this team has major objections to the designs.

In "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," the forest was filled with magical trees. One child, Marshal, created a very "unusual" tree. He was a quiet, unassuming child who patiently listened to all recommendations concerning his design, and then continued to work meticulously on the details of a tree that defied all traditional concepts of trees. Following the performance, he dragged his shy mother on the stage singing over and over "Come look at my tree!" That was more than I heard him say throughout the entire month. His design makes me wonder how he sees our world and what impact he will have on it. Of course, the construction crew was outraged because it didn't look like a tree, yet despite their objections and the construction difficulties, the magical tree was built as it had been designed.

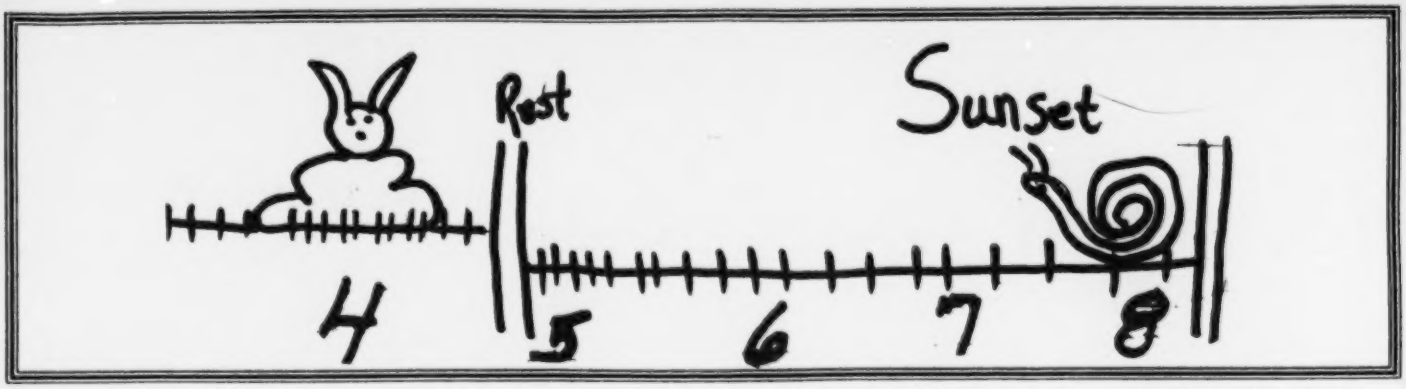
Clearly, I believe that the performance is the product of a fabulous process, and the focus must be on the insights, skills and discoveries we all make on the journey.

We analyze the plans, research construction techniques and materials, and invite advice from community construction artists, tape out the actual sizes of flats or large pieces on the floor, make material lists, estimate costs, purchase materials, and plan construction techniques. The planning is often difficult; they always want to jump in the with hammer and nails, so we keep asking "What do we need to do next?" and writing out a plan as a guide.

Austin was in the core group for "The Magical Place Called Snace." He was a flitter; every project interested him, and he would flit to help groups that did not desire his assistance, and then leave them to flit elsewhere. But when he was challenged to keep the cardboard fence from falling over, he worked for days designing and building supports and angles that braced the fence so that it never fell over again; and Austin stopped flitting.

The students who have chosen to be directors work with the completed score and map out the stage movements in the director's book prior to rehearsals. They work through the process of visualizing the movement and understanding the motivation for each performer. The staging and props are notated, but often adjusted, as we discover the energy and the balance needed on stage.

To perform in the opera, students must audition with a song and dialogue from the score. I feel it is important to cast each student who builds up enough courage to audition, and many opportunities are guaranteed by having large chorus numbers. The teachers and the student directors assist me by filling out casting sheets, and the



Fourth-grade composers decided to use animals to denote tempo in their opera "A Magical Place Called Snace." The Snail indicates a slow tempo while a rabbit is for a fast tempo.

principal cast members are chosen by looking for children with unusual flair and energy. Many times, the students who seem best suited for principal roles are the children who have difficulties being still, and, even though they may struggle in a traditional classroom, they often blossom in the spotlight. Each cast member receives a complete score, and we work together to understand the process of building a character. They identify on paper the traits of their character. Throughout the rehearsal process, questions are constantly being asked so that the decisions and movements have purpose.

The costume and prop crews create lists of needed articles based on the designs. Most of the time, the performers provide their own costumes and props, but a shopping trip to a second hand store is a must, and then the crew does the needed adjustments by adding decorative touches.

Although the makeup for the performance is basic, the crew builds transformational skills that they use for the performance. Lighting is often nonexistent, but if colored gels or spots are available, we create a lighting chart and train the light crew to work lights.

Stage managers have full responsibility backstage for leading the stage crew in the scene changes. Adult support is provided only in case of emergencies. The crews are dressed in black, which they wear as proudly as if they were wearing the most important costumes on stage.

Performance skills grow as students work through the performance process. An all-school and evening community performance as well as tours to other schools or senior citizens centers provide opportunities for students to build the skills of performing. The performance is run like a professional show. A process gallery that shows photos and examples of the work in progress, a reception, choreographed company bows, and flowers for the entire cast and crew makes it seem like "the real thing".

I believe that the performance is simply the product of a fabulous process, and the focus of the entire project must be on the insights, skills and discoveries we all make on the journey.

We, as a people, have created expressive ways of communicating our deepest feelings - visual art, music, dance, drama, literature, poetry. Opera integrates each of these art forms into a concentrated, intensified presentation of the creative genius of student creators. When students begin the process with a blank page and create sight, sound, laughter, tears, melody, rhythm, poetry, and drama -- there is no learning more profound than this. ◆

Kay Raplenovich is a classical singer from Ashland, Ohio who has sung with the Cleveland Orchestra, Opera Charleston, Lirico Sperimentale in Spoleto, Italy, and other regional orchestra and opera companies in the U.S. She is an Artist in Education and a touring artist with the Ohio Arts Council. She is actively involved in training and support for teachers in integrated arts.

Marshal's plan for a magical tree was not well received by the set construction crew. However, after many long and serious discussions, the tree, which defied all traditional concepts of trees, was successfully built as it was designed.

(Right) Marshal's working drawing for his stylized tree.